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ABSTRACT

Burnout is a condition that exacts a heavy toll on organizational effectiveness. Conditions that contribute to burnout in human service organizations are lack of funds, lack of flexibility, lack of decision-making power of middle managers, task overload, little recognition for efforts, and nature of client population. Strategies to prevent burnout include instituting a social-professional support group which can provide opportunities for organizational self-assessment, methods to reduce conflict, feedback and rewards, timeouts for individuals, and screening procedures for new counselors. (Author)

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ORGANIZATIONAL BURNOUT IN COUNSELING AGENCIES

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BURNOUT IN HUMAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

Burnout is a nagging problem that mitigates against the adequate functioning of human service organizations. The literature on this subject has focused almost entirely on individual burnout (Cohen, 1978; Freudenburger, 1977; Garte and Rosenblum, 1978; Kahn, 1978; Maslach, 1976,1978; Warnath and Shelton, 1976). The purpose of this article is to examine burnout in human service organizations. Conditions that lead to burnout will be discussed and suggestions will be offered for prevention and remediation.

Organizational burnout may be defined as a syndrome characterized by workers having low job morale, low rates of productivity, high levels of absenteeism, ineffective and infrequent communication between workers and high rates of job turnover. In organizations experiencing burnout there is little apparent direction or goals-the organization and its workers function with no sense of mission.

The question may be asked: why do some human service organizations burn out while others with similar functions seem to thrive? The answer may be that certain conditions exist in some organizations which help create a burnout situation.

Conditions that Lead to Burnout

There are many conditions within human service organizations that may lead to burnout. Six of these will be discussed: a) Lack of funds, b) Lack of flexibility, c) Lack of decision-making power of middle managers, d) Task overload, e) Little recognition for efforts, and f) Nature of the client population.

The lack of funds in human service or non-profit organizations creates three problems. First, the pay for similar work is lower than that in industry, private practice, or business, resulting in job performance that cannot be directly linked with monetary rewards. A second problem is that money is often not available for needed programs. Many times, materials and resources are inadequate to effectively operate existing programs. Third, the physical working conditions are often substandard - a local mental health center may be located in a rundown house with poor or depressing facilities.

Another problem that leads to burnout in human service organizations is their lack of flexibility. This is often due to the need to meet state rules and regulations, which prevent quick changes. For example, in a government funded children's residential facility, if a job description states that the houseparents will be a married couple, a new job description must be submitted, approved, and the contract changed, before one can hire two single people. Yet, the law states that it's discriminatroy to consider marital status in hiring!

An organization's own bureaucracy can be just as hard to break through. Though it may be more efficient for a mental health organization if its counselors took compensatory time off in one or two hour blocks when clients have cancelled out at the last minute, usually, compensatory time can only be taken when the proper forms are submitted to the supervisor, approved, and filed in the front office. This inflexibility results in the counselor being in his/her office at times with no clients, and having to cancel clients appointments when the compensatory time is taken through traditional procedures. Finally, the trend toward accountability necessitates that documentation override direct contact with clients.

A third condition that leads to organizational burnout is the lack of decision making power of middle managers, such as program directors or department

chairpersons. Middle managers often shoulder heavy loads of responsibilities, but may lack the necessary authority to manage these responsibilities efficiently. Often someone far removed from the situation, who has little or no direct contact with clients, makes client-related decisions. This is frustrating to the middle manager and his or her subordinates, who are left to carry out instructions which may come too late to do anything for the clients. Another problem for the middle manager is that government regulations make proper care impossible. For instance, a child who needs special education must first have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) on file. By the time the proper testing is done, all the professionals involved agree on the service needed, and the IEP is developed, a large portion of the school year may have passed.

Another factor contributing to burnout is task overload. This leads to inadequate client care, in that the counselor, teacher, or policeman is preoccupied with clerical requirements, feeling the need to rush one client through in order to get to the next one. This leaves the professional frustrated, thinking that he/she will never get through, and cannot devote the time to do anything well.

Human service workers receive little recognition for their efforts. In industry, one gets raises, promotions, or sales awards. Human service organizations may not have money available for any of these reward systems. Since human service workers are concerned with people, not products, it certainly would not be appropriate to give an award to the counselor who saw the most clients!

Finally, the very nature of the client population leads to burnout. Clients are in need, constantly taking from counselors and staff. Often counseling situations are emotionally charged, which is stressful for the counselor. This constant giving on the part of the counselor, coupled with

a lack of reinforcement and support, leads quickly to burnout.

Symptoms of Burned Out Organizations

Low morale is a chief symptom of a burned out organization. This is characterized by frequent staff turnover, reduced effectiveness, and in-fighting among departments or informal groups. Workers are constantly griping and complaining. The healthy support systems that ought to be present are lacking. There are power plays among informal cliques, which are formed in an effort to provide a support system.

A burned out organization lacks clearly defined goals. The organization functions from crisis to crisis, seeming to lack a sense of mission or direction. If goals do exist, the staff may not be aware of them, or they may not be internalized by the staff. A staff working under such conditions cannot be expected to exhibit much commitment (Moracco, 1978).

Another related symptom of organizational burnout is stagnation. The organization may be expanding in terms of the number of clients served, but it lacks organizational and staff development. Either the organization isn't providing in-service training, or the in-service isn't relevant to the staff's actual work situation. New ideas are not generated; programs and policies remain the same year after year, even though the environment or the clientele may have changed. For example, a high school exists whose curriculum is designed for middle class whites, but for the past two years over half of its students have been bussed in from black neighborhoods.

A fourth symptom is a lack of understanding from leadership towards employees. Workers approach their supervisors with problems and get such macho responses as "What's the matter, can't you take it" (Maslack, 1978)? This leads to lack of respect for supervisors and administrators. As a consequence, strategies are employed by the staff to hide problems from administrators.

Workers in burned out organizations show physical and emotional disturbances. These are manifested in higher levels of absenteeism, especially on "stress" days - Monday and Friday. People get sick more often, and there is more alcohol and drug abuse (Freudenberger, 1975). Workers may be observed taking tranquilizers to "calm their nerves", or aspirin for tension headaches. They become irritable, preoccupied and anxious. This creates higher rates of absenteeism, which in turn leads to more task overload to compensate for those who are out sick.

Burned out organizations lack communication networks that healthy organizations exhibit. There is a preoccupation with organizational roles usually related to status or hierarchy within the organization. This promotes communication barriers. "Going through the proper channels" fosters the problem of excessive links. With each link in the organizational flow chart, the interpretation of the original message differs a little. "Communication flows more readily from the top of the organization down than it does from the bottom up" (Meadows 1978, p. 2). Administrators can send out memos and call staff meetings if an important message needs to be sent, but a counselor must go up the hierarcial ladder to get a message to the top. Finally, such rigid communication patterns lead to "feelings of alienation and powerlessness among supervisors and supervisees" (Meadows, 1978). Workers feel that they have no input into the functioning of the organization, and supervisors believe that their instructions fall on deaf ears and wonder why their employees do not make positive contributions.

Effects of Burn Out on Organizations

The effects of organization burnout on the counseling staff is fairly obvious. The most pronounced is the delivery of counseling service to needy people is compromised. The overall quality of care given in burned out

organizations decreases. This may cause the staff to work more diligently but to little avail. A cycle is started where more and more effort is needed to accomplish tasks that may have been considered routine earlier. Much of the organization's time is caught up in crisis situations with infrequent occasions devoted to planning and carrying out long term goals.

Staff morale begins a down hill slide which acerbates the situation further. An atmosphere of cynicism permeates the group and this begins to take on its own momentum. It is now more difficult to counteract the callous attitude that is taking hold of members in the organization. Before long rigid thinking and other aspects of authoritarianism increasingly become the main interaction style of the staff.

Job turnover is more likely to occur in burned out organizations. The tenure of any one staff member is apt to be shorter than that in more adequately functioning organizations. Rapid turnover puts additional stress on the organization as resources must be allocated to interview, hire and train new counselors. This drain on the organization makes it less able to cope with the normal stress of counseling. Constant turnover adds to the sense of instability that member feels facing one crisis after another. Burn out takes a heavy toll on individual members. The incidences of mental illnesses generally increase in high stress organizations. Physical illnesses are contracted more often and are harder to shake by people experiencing burn out (Freudenberger, 1977). There is a subsequent rise in marital difficulties for people working in stressful environments. Finally, and most tragically, the suicide rate increases dramatically for individuals involved with work that is associated with high stress factors.

Preventing Burn Out in Organizations

To prevent and combat burnout in organizations a continual process of prevention and self-renewal must be inauguarted (Rubner & Zaffran, 1975). The main vehicle for this process is the social-professional support group (Maslach & Pines, 1977). The social-professional support system affords members in the organization opportunities for analyzing problems they encounter and to discuss how they feel personally about these problems, and provides a structure for support and rewards. The organization should provide the necessary requirements so that the social-professional support system can function with the organization's sanction. Data are being acquired which indicate that burn out rates are lower for individuals who have access to such a system (Maslach & Pines, 1977).

The development of a social-professional support system must not be left to chance. If incorporated into an organization's framework and if accepted in principle by the staff as a sign of growth, this mechanism holds great potential for preventing burn out. Some of the ways in which the support system can function are listed below.

1. Providing opportunities for organizational self-assessment The support group, aware of the need to monitor continually the organization's climate for signs of burnout, can institute periodic self-assessment procedures. This assessment should provide answers to such questions as: What procedures or approaches appear to be obsolete when compared to those in recent professional literature. Are there dynamics in the organization the prevent staff from accomplishing its goals? Are there certain activities required by counselors that consume energy disproproportionate to their worth? A series of questions

such as these asked every month can give the continuous self-assessment needed to help prevent burn out (Rubner & Zaffran, 1975).

2. If after self-assessment the support group feels that there are some activities which hinder the organization's effectiveness, it is obliged to ameleriorate the situation. The strategy used to accomplish this could be similar to that identified by Moracco (1979). This strategy uses the consensus approach to p blem solving or conflict resolution and allows resolutions to be enacted which are agreeable to the whole group.

3. The support group can also provide feedback and rewards to its members. The group can provide a vehicle where counselors can discuss client problems professionally and their reaction to these problems in an open and honest manner. Counselors can have an opportunity to discuss how they feel about clients without having to feel inadequate. This function is not to be confused with social chit-chat: The support group should discourage coffee-break conversation. There are other outlets for this type of social interaction.

4. Individual members can seek help from the group when they sense they are developing signs of burn out. The professional-social support gruop can provide the framework for timeouts in the organization. Timeouts (Freudenberger, 1977) are a way of distancing yourself from stress by withdrawing from the situation. Sometimes it is necessary for a counselor to take a short vacation or simply stay away from the organization. The support system recognizing this need can take up the responsibilities of the counselor. This time away is not a regularly scheduled one such as annual vacations. rather it is based on needs as identified by an individual counselor or by the support system. The individual who takes timeouts must recognize this as a

legitimate action with no cause for feeling guilty.

Related to this is the concept that burn out can help to be prevented if boredom is not allowed to set in. Frequently, aspects of counseling are so routine that there is a danger of becoming insensitive to the needs of clients. This can be overcome to a certain extent by changing the activities of counselors. Some counselors could take on administrative tasks, others can become involved in interacting with clients who have concerns substantially different from what is normally a part of the counselor's routine case load. If managed creatively, counselors can take on decision-making duties typically associated with administrators. One byproduct of changing functions is that an appreciation is gained for other roles and responsibilities in the organization.

5. Because there is a real danger that the unrealistically committed counselor is headed for burnout, the support system can carefully screen potential counselors for the organization. In addition to assessing whether the candidate can cope adequately with the stress-laden conditions of a counseling environment, there are certain indicators that should alert the group to candidates prone to be unrealistically commited. One such is the extent to which the potential candidate involves him or herself with counseling to the exclusion of meaningful outside activities. The one-dimensional individual completely devoted to counseling who expects to receive all of his or her reinforcements from counseling is particular vulnerable to burnout. A counselor should have an outside life that is both distinct and meaningful. This provides the individual with a little private space that is necessary because of the intimate nature and involvement of the counseling process.

The five functions of the social-professional support system do not constitute the full extent of activities that this group can undertake. Much

depends on the organization's settings, goals, structure, and activities. That is, support systems operating in school organizations will probably function somewhat differently from systems in mental health agencies. The important point to be made is that the concept of a professional-support group should be organized formally into the organizational structure. By being aware that counseling organizations may be particularly vulnerable to burnout and having a mechanism to deal with this phenomenon, burnout can be faced and its consequences can be held to a minimum.

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